

A poison ivy experiment

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Poison ivy is generally an interesting topic to everyone. Some of us delight to claim practical immunity while others are pleased to describe various remedies. During the summer, I had some new experience with *Rhus toxicodendron* L. and a little with *Rhus vernix* L.

The latter occurred in connection with a field trip of the American Fern Society and the Torrey Botanical Club at Sparta, New Jersey, where some 40 distinct fern types were noted with two others nearby but not seen on this occasion. Part of the trip was in a swamp in which not infrequent growths of poison sumac were noted. One of the party, very susceptible to *Rhus* poisoning, found he had accidentally come into contact with the leaves of poison sumac. Another member of the party proposed a remedy easily obtainable in almost any situation in this neighborhood, namely, jewel weed. Presently, some jewel weed was found and the juice of the crushed stems was rubbed over the parts of the skin which might have come in contact with the poison sumac.

The sequel, of course, should be that no poisoning appeared on the suspected areas. I must say that I did not hear definitely, but I think this is highly probable since *Rhus* poisoning usually, if not always, is dependent on contact with the actual sap of the plants.

A little later, I had an opportunity to experiment with jewel weed as a possible remedy. It had been my experience for a long time that neither of these species produced on my own skin any serious disability. A drop of the sap from the broken leaf always gives rise to a small inflamed area not as uncomfortable as a mosquito bite and lasting only a little longer. Accordingly, I proceeded to try out jewel weed as a remedy while spending time at Lake George this last summer. On the back of each hand, I wet a small area by rubbing the broken end of a poison ivy leaf. It may be noted that no poisoning or inflammation developed on the parts of the hands that had held the leaves. Next, on the back of the left hand, I rubbed jewel weed juice by bruising the stems and rubbing them over the area. On the right hand, I had the usual reaction, a small red spot about a

quarter of an inch in diameter. On the left hand, I had the worst case of poisoning and inflammation that I have ever experienced. Rubbing on the jewel weed juice served to spread the poisoning and apparently to cause it to take deeper effect than usual. Most of the back of that hand was swollen and red for some days, darkening gradually to look something like a birth mark and finally scaling off in particles to leave little areas of glistening new skin.

The result of the experiment was simply to emphasize past information regarding methods of treatment which cautioned against rubbing possibly infected areas with water or alcohol or other agencies which might spread the sap. The old prescription of strong alkaline soap, such as ordinary yellow washing soap, potassium permanganate, and, more lately, iron chloride are still the best prescriptions. I might add that in my own experience, contrary to wide-spread belief, poison sumac is no more virulent than poison ivy.

Since writing the above and reporting my adverse results with jewel weed juice, I have had the opportunity of talking to two or three good botanists who believe in it. Apparently, however, they recommend it as an alleviation after inflammation has set in, not as an antidote of the actual poisoning.

It is with regret that I report the failure of another proposed experiment, aimed to determine the inheritance of susceptibility. In the family I studied, I found that the father and two sons were almost nonsusceptible, but the three distaff members of the family refused to serve as guinea pigs.

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